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ABSTRACT

Policy-making problems being faced in Louisiana regarding the testing of handicapped students within a state mandated minimum competency testing program are dealt with. The decision-making process is complicated by the fact that two groups (staff administering the test and staff administering programs for the handicapped) with differing orientations must jointly decide on the most feasible, ethical, and legal policies for testing handicapped students. The major contributions of the evaluator in this process are described, as is the evaluation itself. The point is made that although the evaluation provides a forum for classifying the needs of policy-making groups and for objectively assessing those needs, the evaluator may actually provide the stimulus for developing the policies. (Author/GK)

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Utilization of Evaluation Results in Joint Policy Making

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UTILIZATION OF EVALUATION RESULTS IN JOINT POLICY-MAKING

Introduction

Minimum Competency Testing (MCT) is a fairly recent development in the field of public education. In 1972, Oregon was the first state to institute a program. Now there are at least 36 states in which some form of minimum competency testing legislation has been enacted (Pipho, 1978). In general, these programs have been concerned with assessing the basic skills of non-handicapped students. In the early MCT efforts, little consideration was given to the needs of handicapped students and the implications of including or excluding them from the testing programs. No state included provisions for them in the original legislation (Smith and Jenkins, 1980). During the 1979 session of the Louisiana legislature, Louisiana lawmakers passed legislation mandating a minimum competency testing program for its public school system. As in other states, the Louisiana law did not include specific provisions about testing handicapped students.

This paper deals with the policy-making problems that are being faced in Louisiana regarding the testing of handicapped students within a state mandated MCT program. The decision-making process is complicated by the fact that two groups of professionals with differing orientations must necessarily be involved in the decision-making process. That is, the staff who administer the testing program and the staff who administer programs for the handicapped must decide jointly on the most feasible, ethical and legal policies for testing handicapped students in our public schools.

Background

Minimum Competency Testing programs are a response to a general uneasiness with the apparent competencies of students graduating from our public schools. It is hoped that these programs will stop social promotions and build a system of accountability into public education.

Proponents of MCT Programs argue that Minimum Competency Testing will help to more precisely define the basic skills necessary to function as an adult and will more clearly define the curriculum needed in the schools. Thus, it is hoped, Minimum Competency Testing will assure that students leaving our schools are prepared to enter the adult world. Minimum Competency Testing places the burden of accountability on the public school system.

Critics of the program argue that Minimum Competency Testing over-simplifies the needs of students entering the adult world of work. Minimum Competency Testing, they claim, focuses on the "basics" of education while ignoring the more complex needs of entering adult society. It is questionable whether Minimum Competency Testing programs can define precisely what is necessary and what is not. They fear that minimum competencies will become the maximum goals of our schools. Rather than striving for a measure of excellence in public education, the focus will be toward assuring that all students reach a mediocre level of competence. Critics further complain that Minimum Competency Testing does not assure that students will receive remediation. Rather, Minimum Competency Testing may become a means for further segregating students and excluding them. Recent federal legislation (Public Law 94-142 and Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act) has done much to safeguard against such exclusion of the handicapped: Minimum Competency Testing could be in conflict with these safeguards if proper consideration is not given to the needs of exceptional children in these programs.

State programs have approached the task of dealing with the handicapped in a number of ways. There are provisions for everything from across-the-board

exemptions for the handicapped to the development of alternative tests for them. Louisiana is in the process of dealing with the policy and program issues related to MCT Testing and the special education students.

Louisiana's Program

Louisiana has had a statewide testing program since 1977 as a phase-in for minimum competency testing. The results of this test have not been used to determine promotion for individual students. Within that testing program somewhat informal guidelines had been developed for testing special education students. Although there were problems with these guidelines because they were informal and not disseminated widely or followed consistently, there was relatively little concern over them because the test did not have an impact on individual students. In some instances schools simply did not test handicapped students. Schools generally were not concerned about the test because the scores of special education students were not averaged into their school reports. Parents were not concerned because the tests had no bearing on their children's progress in school.

Action by the 1979 Louisiana legislative session created a new emphasis on testing that changed the apathetic attitudes dramatically. The state legislature mandated a new testing program, the results of which would be used to determine promotion from grade to grade. As a principal criterion for promotion the test took on new significance for the handicapped. A greater emphasis was placed on the need to develop policies and procedures for handling the testing of handicapped students. The policy analysis activities of the Bureau of Evaluation which will be described here grew out of that need.

On the one hand, we have the Bureau of Accountability in the Department of Education responsible for the development and administration of Louisiana's state testing programs. This group is composed of a staff of curriculum and testing specialists. It operates under a system of state laws and regulations

concerning state testing. On the other hand, we have the Office of Special Educational Services in the Department of Education responsible for the development, administration and monitoring of programs for exceptional students in Louisiana. It is composed of specialists in every category of exceptionality. In addition to state laws regarding the handicapped these staff members must also deal with federal statutes concerning the civil rights of the handicapped. Both of these groups have high stakes in the development of policy regarding testing of handicapped students. The testing staff must safeguard the integrity of the testing program and the special education staff must protect the rights of exceptional students, assuring that their unique needs are addressed. It is into this context that the Bureau of Evaluation in an independent consultant role is able to influence policy decisions within the Department of Education between two separate units.

Problem

There are two policy decisions which must be addressed by the staffs of the testing program and of the Office of Special Educational Services. Both programs address them from unique perspectives. The first policy question is whether exceptional children should be included in the testing program at all. From the perspective of the testing staff many exceptional children will not show mastery on the test so they wonder why they should deal with them at all. Although special education students have been included in the testing program in the past, no one has analyzed their results on the test. There was a feeling however, that these students could not "pass" the test. Examples of scribbled, half eaten and torn answer sheets were sent to the testing staff by irate and frustrated teachers of moderately and severely retarded students. Those special education students became, in the minds of the testing staff, all special education students. Mean scores on the test indicated to the test givers that no category of exceptionality (note: except for the gifted and talented category)

reached the cut-off for "passing." Therefore, it was felt, no special education student could pass the test. The test givers perceive the problems with testing over 170,000 regular education students to be so great that dealing with special education students was only an added burden. They feel the Office of Special Educational Services should deal with its own students. From the perspective of the Special Education staff, however, the test is mandated for all students and the testing of exceptional children should therefore be the responsibility of the testing staff.

From a legal perspective the basis for testing exceptional children is pretty clear. Louisiana law mandates a test for all public school students upon which promotion will be based. Federal laws protecting the civil rights of the handicapped require that they not be categorically excluded from public programs (although on an individual basis exemptions are allowable).

The legal opinion that exceptional students must be tested does not solve all of the problems. It does, however, define a further problem: When exceptional children are tested, provisions must be made for them which are fair not only to them but to the regular education students who must take the test. This is the second policy decision.

Providing an "easier" version for exceptional students opens up all sorts of issues to the public. Why should an exceptional student be promoted or receive a diploma because he or she passed the test with special help when a regular education student who had no such help may be retained? On the other hand, why should a handicapped student be further penalized for his or her condition because the state does not have the technology to fairly assess his or her abilities? Needless to say there are two sides of this issue which are important in the decision-making process and both sides are concerned for their own specific needs. The evaluator provides an empirical basis for decision-making which may remove the process from a purely emotional arena.

The Approach

With this description of the testing program, its problems, and the two groups involved in the development of the testing policies as background, it is clear that the evaluator's role in the process might necessarily take many forms, which was definitely the case in our policy analysis effort. Stenner defined evaluation as the process of clarifying a set of information needs and collecting, analyzing and reporting information to alleviate those needs (Stenner, 1971). In this case, it will become clear that the task of clarifying a set of information needs was as important as collecting, analyzing and reporting the information.

The evaluator's first task was to convene the two groups to systematically approach the development of the policies. This was a major contribution to the decision making process since up to this point no one had assumed responsibility for the task. The policies currently in use were informal and not well documented or disseminated, as mentioned earlier. Both groups more or less viewed the other as responsible for deciding what to do with the handicapped students and therefore little joint planning had taken place. The evaluator as an independent consultant provided a forum for the joint planning and discussion sessions which were needed. The Bureau of Evaluation provided the stimulus for the clarification of needs --- first determining that there was a breakdown in communication and children were not being served, second articulating what it was, and proposing a strategy to alleviate the problem.

The second task of the evaluator was to serve in the role of an interpreter to both groups in the clarification of needs. Often the two staffs were concerned about similar issues, but voiced those concerns in their own jargon and cited their own regulations or guidelines. The evaluator provided a means to educate each group in the requirements or limitations that the other faced in the testing program. The evaluator helped familiarize each with the terminology of the other and provided a common language of evaluation for them to use. Through

this process the testing staff became more aware of the finer points of federal laws mandated for the handicapped; the special education staff learned about the special problems that the testing staff faced in order to meet the mandates of the state testing laws, and both groups learned to speak in terms of definable questions for which answers might be found in an objective data based evaluation. The evaluator did not define the needs of the two groups but assisted them in clarifying their needs in such a manner that data could be collected to alleviate the needs.

The third major contribution of the evaluator, then, was the one which most often comes to mind when we speak of evaluation. The evaluator provided both groups with an objective means by which to assess the effects of various policy decisions by the design and conduct of an evaluation of the state testing program with handicapped students.

The Evaluation

The evaluation itself was composed of two phases. One involved the re-analysis and reporting of previously collected state testing results for exceptional children. This phase was necessitated by the pervasive feelings by the state testing staff and some special educators that exceptional students could not pass the state test. In previous years the results of the special education students' tests were reported as a mean score for reading, writing, and arithmetic, the same reporting format used with the regular education students. This reporting format, however, presented a false picture of the exceptional student. Mean scores for the total exceptional population do not differentiate between types of handicaps. Special educators recognize that there is great variation in the populations they serve.

For example, a blind student who is a braille reader may perform very much like a sighted student, given the use of braille materials. A moderately mentally retarded student, on the other hand, will never perform on a basic

skills test like a regular education student no matter what the materials or conditions. Additionally, there is almost as much variation within each of the handicapping categories as there is between them. Therefore, a frequency distribution of scores for each group of students was produced to describe the results of the test for each handicap in more detail.

An analysis of the over 11,000 special education test cases clearly demonstrated that special education students, when looked at individually, could demonstrate mastery on the state assessment. Certain groups such as the speech impaired, visually impaired, and orthopedically handicapped consistently scored highest. Other groups were less consistent, but often had scores indicating mastery, while others, such as the mentally retarded scored consistently below mastery. This information served to alert both the testing staff and the staff of special education to the appropriateness of the test for some exceptional students. It provided them with an objective answer to the question of whether or not the test was appropriate for some special education students.

This first phase of the evaluation was far from conclusive, however, in providing the policy makers with information upon which to base guidelines for testing handicapped students. It reinforced the legal opinion that no student should be categorically excluded from the test only because of being handicapped, but it did not provide the policy makers with a clear understanding of which handicapped children to test and how to test them. No one knew, for example, if the students who were tested in 1979-80 fairly represented all special education students since there were no data on the numbers or kinds of students who had been excused from the test. There was also no information on whether or not these students were administered a modified test.

Phase Two of the evaluation (which involved the analysis of the 1981 spring test results) moves a step beyond the broad cut at answering whether or not the handicapped should be tested. Phase Two moves toward answering questions about which handicapped groups should be tested with the state test and how to

test them. It studies the impact that modifications in test administration might have on the exceptional children's chances to demonstrate mastery on the test.

In Phase Two we will analyze the results of thousands of exceptional students. In addition to the information that we had last year, however, we will also have other information on things like who was exempted from the test, what types of modification were given to those who took the test, and who tested the exceptional students. With the addition of this information we hope to be able to determine which segment of the special education population is actually being tested. Is it only the less handicapped children? If so, the results of the evaluation can be generalized only to those students. Other means will have to be developed to determine alternatives to the test for more severely handicapped children. We also hope to be able to better define those groups of students who might profit from receiving a modified version of the test. If visually impaired students perform well with large print test booklets, this may be the only modification to the testing program they require in order to be included with the test along with the regular education students. Are there students for whom even modifications of the test do not meet their needs? If so, alternative types of tests may be needed, or they may need to be excluded from a statewide testing program altogether.

There are issues in addition to these which must be addressed. Some will require further study for particular categories of children. The most difficult of course, are those problems for which neither group of policy makers has clear-cut evidence. We will probably find that there are exceptional students who function quite well on the test with or without modifications. For these children the decision to test is simple. For those who are severely or profoundly handicapped the decision is also simple, the test is clearly inappropriate for them. Both the staff of the testing office and the staff of special education can agree on what to do with these students. Future decisions must be made

however, on what can be done for those who cannot demonstrate mastery on the state test, but for whom there is question about the appropriateness of the testing technique itself and concern that the students might do well if we knew how to test them.

Summary

The evaluator in this situation plays an important role in the decision making process. The evaluation provides a forum for clarifying the needs of the policy-making groups and for objectively assessing those needs. The evaluator provides both groups with a means for communicating in an objective setting, using language common to both, to arrive at decisions which may be acceptable to both. The evaluator, in fact, may provide the stimulus for developing the policies.

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